

# The Virginia NEWS LETTER

## Virginia—An Emerging Leader in the Nation's Local Food Movement

by Tanya Denckla Cobb

### Introduction

Virginia earned some boasting rights when the June 2011 issue of *Forbes* referred to Charlottesville as the “locavore capital of the world.”<sup>1</sup> The term “locavore” is a newly coined word used to describe a movement whose adherents prefer eating food grown close to home. This designation for Charlottesville, a welcome surprise to many, reflects the rapidly increasing importance of the local food movement in Virginia. Given the nature of the movement, the definition of local food varies widely throughout the world. Some groups define it as all foods found within a specific mile radius, such as 50 to 100 miles, while others use travel time as a measure, such as food grown within no more than one day’s round trip. More remote or challenging climate localities may adopt broader definitions to reflect their specific conditions, and some organizations, usually institutional buyers, may adopt political boundaries such as anything produced within a state.

In recent years all components of our state’s local food system, from farm to fork, have seen considerable advances: training new farmers, creating new urban farms and community gardens, developing new infrastructure for processing and distribution, bringing fresh food into our schools, increasing affordable access to fresh food, and even evaluating local and state policies to remove barriers. These



Photo by Dan Addison

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trends reflect increasing interest among Virginians in growing and buying locally produced food, as well as a desire to adjust the state’s economic and public policy framework to make it easier for Virginians to buy and sell food with their neighbors.

This article will try to gauge and document how widespread and deeply rooted these trends are in Virginia and will examine the obstacles to continued growth of the movement. It will begin with a look at some of the motivations for the movement, its expected benefits, and the complex ways it fits into the social fabric and affects community life. In addition to questions of community health and personal health related to food, it will consider the issue of nutritious food as a basic human right. Finally the article will review the work of the Virginia Food Sustainability Council and its recommendations for food policies and will conclude with a preview of the second Virginia Food Security Summit, scheduled for December 5-6.

### Motivations for the Local Food Movement

The local food movement is not a simple, one-dimensional, passing fad. The movement is complex, multidimensional and, if graced by the same persistence of advocacy as other social movements, also likely to become integrated into our long-term legal and social fabric.



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With relatively minor changes in individual food purchasing behaviors, major positive changes for Virginia’s economy can be realized. Virginia Cooperative Extension, the educational outreach program of Virginia’s land grant universities, Virginia Tech and Virginia State University, has estimated that if each Virginia household would repurpose only \$10 of its weekly food expenditure to local foods and drinks then local and state economies would realize an annual economic benefit of \$1.65 billion.

Supporting our economy, however, is not the sole, nor perhaps even the most important, motivator for Virginia’s blossoming local food movement. Key motivators are broadly diverse, ranging from food safety and land conservation to community sustainability. For some, the rise in food contamination outbreaks is an impetus for people to seek food that is less likely to be contaminated than food produced by current methods of centralized food processing and shipping. For others, the epidemic in childhood obesity and diabetes is cause to change the foods served to our children in school cafeterias, and to initiate school gardens and curricula to educate the next generation about food, nutrition and health. The desire to provide fresh, healthy food to those who are hungry, disabled, low-income, incarcerated, homeless or homebound inspires people to initiate different kinds of projects—gleaning (gathering leftovers), volunteer farms to serve pantries, community gardens, catering, or community farms where people can not only grow food but gain confidence and job skills. For still others, the desire to support rural landscapes, conserve land, and heal our environment motivates them to build programs that will support new and existing farmers who practice sustainable agriculture,<sup>2</sup> which advances environmental health in the context of economic profitability as well as social and economic equity. And finally, the ideal of building a sustainable community contains an implicit desire to build greater connectivity among people, often finding expression in farmers’ markets, festivals, crop mobs (gatherings of one-time, single-event volunteers who assist farmers with specific tasks) and other food-based gatherings that can nurture meaningful relationships and community.

All of these motivations are real, and all are finding expression in the changes rippling through the commonwealth, shifting how Virginians think about, grow and buy their food. Though the face of Virginia’s local food system has evolved significantly in just over four years since the 2007 summit, these changes are just the beginning of what is still to come.

Virtually every aspect of community life—economic activity, public health, and environmental health—can be impacted and advanced by the local food movement. Whether it is growing the number of farmers, butchers, bakers or tomato sauce makers, all members of the community have a stake in growing a healthy community-based food system. These interconnections are illustrated in **Figure 1**.

### **Food Is A Gateway For Building Community Sustainability**

In the context of community, food is hardly just food. Its role in a community is powerful, with influences and impacts on the community sociology, economy and ecology. How a community produces and distributes its food is telling an indicator of the community’s sustainability and resilience—and perhaps even a gateway to achieving greater sustainability and resilience.

### **Place-based Food Festivals Foster Identity and Revenues**

Local food and agriculture can provide a community with a combined sense of place and unique identity, which in today’s world of globalization and chain sameness is a rare commodity that conveys real value in the form of building community social capital, or its ability to work toward common cause.<sup>3</sup> More place-based foods and traditions are becoming an important source of income generation through community food festivals. In 2011 the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) documented more than 100 food festivals in Virginia,<sup>4</sup> which provide entertainment and fun over eleven months of the year, featuring all kinds of Virginia-grown foods such as beef, pork, oysters, crab, apples, peaches, berries, garlic, ramps, corn, peanuts, and wines. From rural to urban communities, food tourism is boosting local economies. Examples are Monterey’s Highland Maple Festival in March, the Native American Heritage Festival in Southside’s Occoneechee State Park in May, and Norfolk’s two June events of Harborfest and Bayou Boogaloo and Cajun Food Festival. Agritourism, it turns out, is limited only by the community’s creativity, as demonstrated by Virginia Beach’s development of “Coastal Food Tours” and “Live the Life Adventures” in Southeast Virginia, giving tourists an insider’s look at farms, markets and restaurants.<sup>5</sup>

### **Local Food Supports Farmers and Working Landscapes**

Local food production, by keeping landscapes in working farms, can also be an important tool for

Figure 1: A Community Based Food System



*“... to help our farmers keep farming, better connections between farmers and local markets are needed.”*

Source: Eric S. Bendfeldt, Martha Walker, Travis Bunn, Lisa Martin, and Melanie Barrow, *A Community-Based Food System: Building Health, Wealth, Connection, and Capacity as the Foundation of Our Economic Future* (Blacksburg, Virginia: Virginia Extension Service, May 2011), p.5. Diagram courtesy of the Virginia Extension Service. The diagram was adapted from the C.S. Mott Group at Michigan State University. <http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/3306/3306-9029/3306-9029-PDF.pdf>

land conservation and preserving rural character. Ninety-eight percent of Virginia’s farms are family-owned and operated, with farms averaging only about 180 acres,<sup>6</sup> meaning the job of preserving Virginia’s beautiful landscape is a matter of keeping most of our 47,000 full or part-time farmers in the business of farming. And to help our farmers keep farming, better connections between farmers and local markets are needed. Seeing this connection, the Piedmont Environmental Council (PEC) demonstrated leadership and vision when it became one of the first land conservation organizations in the nation to jump on the local food bandwagon in 2007 by creating Virginia’s first “Buy Fresh, Buy Local” guide. Four years later, thanks to PEC’s leadership and support, Virginia now boasts nine “Buy Fresh, Buy Local” chapters. They are in Charlottesville, Fredericksburg, Hampton Roads, Loudoun County,

Northern Piedmont, Northern Virginia, Richmond, Shenandoah Valley and the South Centre Corridor.<sup>7</sup> A major goal of the Virginia Farm Bureau is to save Virginia’s working farms, which it highlighted by launching its new “Save Our Food” motto in 2008, along with an online “Fresh Food Locator.” With “Save Our Food,” Greg Hicks, Vice-President of Communications for the Farm Bureau, says they want to support Virginia farmers by increasing awareness and purchasing of locally grown or raised foods. At the same time, Hicks notes this “also prevents America from becoming dependent on foreign foods”—an important consideration for Virginia’s long-term food security.<sup>8</sup> “Save Our Food” appears to be working with strong interest since the campaign began in the form of new members as well as 400 consumers who have joined via the Web.

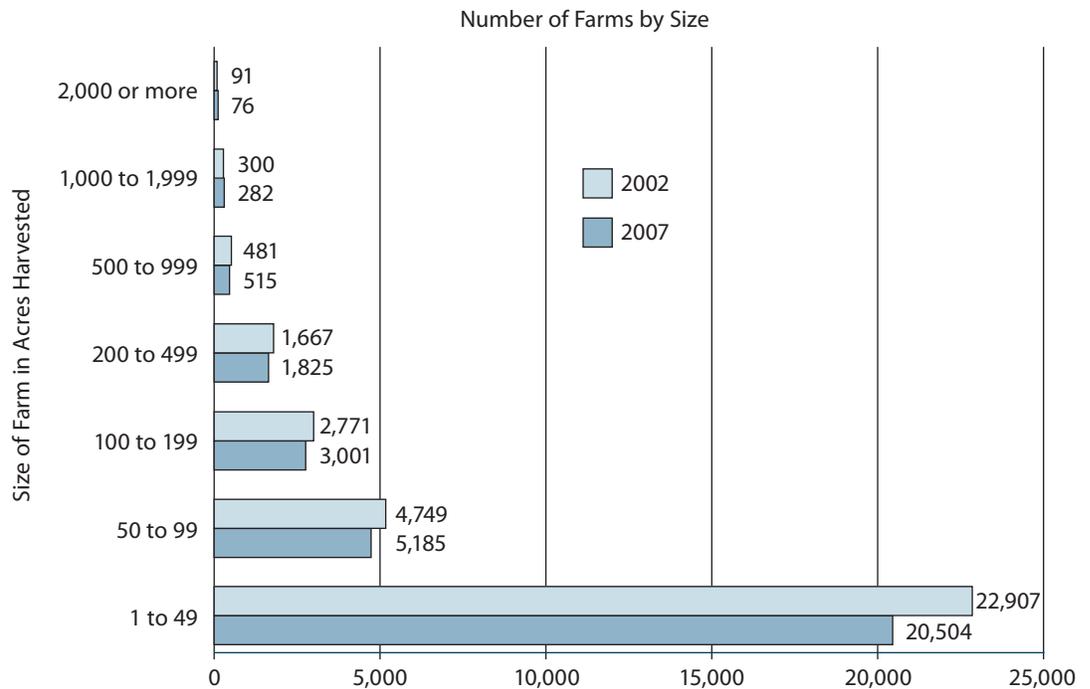
The most recent agriculture census in 2007 indicates several interesting trends in Virginia. The data indicate that, as we continue to lose farmland and specifically acreage in cropland, Virginia’s local food movement also realized a similar loss in the number of small farms from 2002 to 2007 as shown in **Figure 2**.



Image courtesy of Piedmont Environmental Council.

*“Local food can also build jobs and local economies through the infrastructure needed for processing, marketing and distributing food.”*

**Figure 2: Number of Virginia Farms by Acreage Size, 2002 to 2007**



Source: 2002, 2007 Census of Agriculture. [http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Full\\_Report/Volume\\_1\\_Chapter\\_1\\_State\\_Level/Virginia/st51\\_1\\_008\\_008.pdf](http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Full_Report/Volume_1_Chapter_1_State_Level/Virginia/st51_1_008_008.pdf)

### Local Food Distribution Builds Local Economies

Local food can also build jobs and local economies through the infrastructure needed for processing, marketing and distributing food. In the last five years, creative entrepreneurs have seen local food as a growth opportunity and taken the leap to invest in building new processing and distribution mechanisms. Small-scale slaughterhouses, long in demand, but unavailable due to the lack of federal inspectors, have begun to make a comeback. Virginia now boasts niche slaughterhouses like True & Essential Meats in Harrisonburg, founded by former landscape architect-turned-entrepreneur Joe Cloud, in partnership with farmer Joel Salatin; Blue Ridge Meats in Front Royal, founded by local sheep farmers Doug and Lois Aylestock; Donald’s Meat Processing in Lexington, founded by local cattle farmer Charlie Potter; and EcoFriendly Foods in Moneta, founded by Bev Eggleston.<sup>9</sup> Also, regaining a foothold are custom butcheries such as the Belmont Butchery in Richmond, the Organic Butcher in McLean and Charlottesville, Two Fat Butchers in Front Royal, Red Apron Butcher in Arlington, and Let’s Meat on the Avenue in Alexandria.

Another important addition to our infrastructure is the sudden emergence of food hubs, which aggregate products from small farmers and gives them for the first time unprecedented access to larger markets and, in some cases, even

to institutions. Shut out of this lucrative and dependable market because of their inability to provide adequate quantities to match demand and, for institutions, their lack of multi-million dollar liability insurance, small farmers can now be assured of more reliable markets for their products. In just four years, entrepreneurial savvy has sprouted at least eight food hubs across the commonwealth—the Local Food Hub, which has garnered national attention and recognition, serving Charlottesville; Retail Relay, an online service for the Charlottesville area; Coastal Farms serving the Virginia Beach area; Fall Line Farms, Dominion Harvest and LuLu’s (online) Local Food serving Richmond; Runner-Bean.Com serving the Roanoke area; and FarmerGirls.Net serving the Warrenton area.

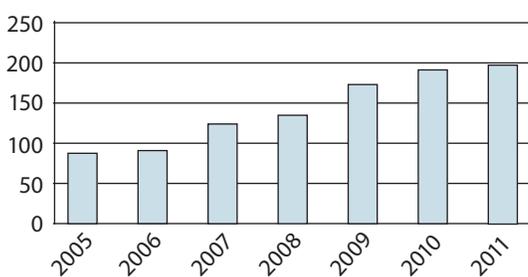
In the New River Valley, another kind of aggregation hub has been created in the form of Good Food–Good People, an organic produce brokerage for about 50 farmers. SustainFloyd, a nonprofit, is facilitating the development of local food infrastructure with the purchase of a refrigerated truck, and exploring the feasibility of a regional community food processing kitchen, as well as what might be the state’s first local dairy processing facility to aggregate local milk and produce value-added products.<sup>10</sup>

In the Shenandoah Valley, another kind of aggregation hub was initiated in 2005 with Dayton’s Shenandoah Valley Produce Auction. The

Auction enables people to buy large quantities at wholesale prices, offering an outlet for local Mennonite farmers who may not wish to sell at a farmers' market for reasons of faith or time. By 2009, in just four years, the auction had more than tripled its gross revenues from under \$400 thousand to nearly \$1.4 million.<sup>11</sup>

One of the state's earliest innovators in creating a food hub is Anthony Flaccovento, former Executive Director of Appalachian Sustainable Development (ASD) in Abingdon, who developed a marketing network and brand, Appalachian Harvest, for organic producers in Southwest Virginia and northern Tennessee. Founded in 2000, ASD had grown from a handful to a solid network in 2010 of about 70 organic farmers, whose focus is on building healthy soil and plant ecosystems, using biodiversity, biological systems, and minimal and low-impact inputs. What's more, about 75 percent of these farmers were former tobacco growers, for whom a future in farming once looked bleak, if not impossible, during the late 1990s with the tobacco settlement and buy-out of tobacco quota. One key to this success was Flaccovento's ability to develop markets and negotiate contracts with large regional grocery chains, such as Ukrops, Whole Foods and Food City; these contracts provided farmers with some assurance that the process of transitioning to organic would be worthwhile, as they would have an advance buyer for their produce. Another key to success was ASD's ongoing education and training provided to farmers to help them become proficient in using sustainable and organic farming methods.<sup>12</sup> A third and vibrant avenue for local food distribution in Virginia is the local farmers' market. The growth in this sector over the past few years is nothing short of astonishing. The number of farmers' markets grew from 88 in 2005 to 198 in 2011 (see **Figure 3**). The markets are outlets for Virginia's vegetables, fruits, berries, meats, eggs and dairy products. These markets are flourishing not just in urban regions. Rural and remote areas, too, are seeking the same benefits.

**Figure 3: Number of Farmers' Markets in Virginia, 2005 to 2011**



Source: Leanne Dubois, Division of Marketing, Office of Promotions, Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. (July 15, 2011)



Martinsville Uptown Farmers' Market. Photo courtesy of the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

In Southwest Virginia, Anthony Flaccovento reports that Appalachian Sustainable Development assisted small, rural communities of 2,500 or fewer people to nearly double the number of markets from 12 to 22 in just five years.

Most markets in Virginia are seasonal, operating from April to October, says Leanne Dubois, with the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Office of Marketing. Eight markets, however, do operate year-round in Alexandria, Arlington County (two markets), Blacksburg, Dayton, Roanoke, The Plains, and Virginia Beach. New trends in farmers' markets are the growth of holiday markets, now numbering 17,<sup>13</sup> which run on selective days for Thanksgiving through Christmas, as well as community investment in permanent structures for their markets, such as in Abingdon, Floyd Town, Harrisonburg, Lakeside in Richmond, Marion, Monterey, Scottsville and Waynesboro.

Lastly, the restaurant market is the fourth important distribution outlet for local food. A major breakthrough in this field was negotiated by the Chipotle national food chain when it worked closely with Joel Salatin to create a system for using his locally raised pork in their Charlottesville restaurant.<sup>14</sup> A parallel effort by farmer Clifford Rohrer in Dayton has created a local farming operation that now provided locally grown potatoes to Route 11 Potato Chips, Sysco, Cavalier Produce, the Local Food Hub, and others.<sup>15</sup> Though this may not be easily replicated, it has demonstrated that where there is interest and persistence there may be a way, and that such a course of action can have significant impacts on the local food chain by providing local growers with a known market for large quantities of product.

In Southwest Virginia, Flaccovento reports that "more restaurants have gotten serious about local buying," pointing to four new restaurants that have joined Appalachian Sustainable Development's network just this year, including the

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new Heartwood Center in Abingdon. Even restaurants not in Virginia are creating important new markets for Virginia-grown food. Through the D.C. Farm to Table restaurant cooperative, founded by D.C. restaurant Mie N Yu’s manager, Oren Molovinsky, with assistance from the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, is serving nearly 15 capital restaurants with produce and Virginia-raised meat. In fact, the cooperative’s main distributor—the D.C. Central Kitchen, a nonprofit giving jobs and assistance to people recovering from homelessness, addiction and incarceration—became the single largest buyer of produce from the Shenandoah Valley Produce Auction in 2009.<sup>16</sup>

### **Local Food Supports Food Justice and Community Health**

Lastly, equitable access to fresh, local food can build a community’s social fabric and spirit while also improving its physical health—as witnessed by the innovative work of many Virginia social justice leaders who are creating urban farms for food, education and building skills.

“Food security” is a concept used to measure “... access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members.”<sup>17</sup> The obverse of food security is “food insecurity”—the percentage of households without sufficient access.<sup>18</sup> Virginia’s food insecurity measure averaged 9.2 percent for the 2007-09 period.<sup>19</sup> Numerous organizations throughout Virginia are tackling this issue. While the Federation of Virginia Food Banks provided food to over 1,012,500 hungry Virginians last year,<sup>20</sup> hundreds of soup kitchens and food pantries in every part of the state also provide daily relief to our hungry. Community food projects are playing an increasing role in hunger relief by providing fresh, local and healthier foods to hunger relief agencies.

Lynchburg Grows, founded in Lynchburg in 2003, grows organic food, which it sells and also donates to local food pantries, while providing important opportunities for people with special needs. The Quality Community Council in Charlottesville uses its Garden of Goodness, started in 2007, and other urban farms to grow organic food in underutilized green spaces in and for low-income neighborhoods while providing people of all ages with nutritional and environmental education.

In a similar vein, the faith-based New Community Project in Harrisonburg has initiated several projects to foster food justice, a concept that communities should exercise their right to grow, sell and eat healthy food. Muddy Bank Farm, where people experiencing difficult life situations,

homelessness or unemployment can grow organic produce; five community gardens for neighborhoods that otherwise wouldn’t have access to land or fresh, organic vegetables; and a school garden program to instill our next generation with wonder and knowledge about food. A key aspect of food justice is the idea that people who are hungry should have access to fresh, healthy food—not just the canned, boxed or dried goods from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which may contain high levels of sodium and high-fructose corn syrup. The Shenandoah Volunteer Farm in Woodstock, founded in 2003—along with other faith-based farms like Richmond’s Shalom Farm founded in 2008 and Culpeper’s Volunteer Farm founded in 2010—grow food with volunteer labor specifically to donate to local food pantries. Their goal is to ensure that their local hungry have access to fresh, healthy food.

An aspect of food justice that is not often discussed is ensuring that access to healthy food is offered to seniors. In Charlottesville, the Jefferson Area Board for Aging (JABA) is pioneering an innovative effort to provide more locally produced food to their homebound and day-care senior clients. JABA has succeeded in sourcing over 36,000 meals a year with as much as 25 percent locally sourced ingredients. To enable them to further increase their use of local food during winter months, and to expand serving local food to all JABA clients—which includes 1,000,000 meals to senior clients at its assisted living center and 50,000 meals annually to homebound senior clients—JABA is exploring the feasibility of a processing and freezing operation that would benefit their homebound clients as well as other nonprofits and businesses in Central and Western Virginia.<sup>21</sup>

While these projects target specific populations, another method for increasing community food justice is to enable more people of varying economic means to access local food. Some of this work may be done by coalitions, such as in rural Appalachia, where Pulaski Fresh Farm to Table is bringing consumers together with producers, holding workshops on home food processing and local food system topics, and creating a network to connect farmers to consumers more effectively.<sup>22</sup> Some of this work may be done through farmers’ markets, which can offer affordable access to local food if conditions permit low-income people to actually get to the market and, once they get there, to use their food assistance dollars. In Southwest Virginia, with Appalachian Sustainable Development’s leadership, the Abingdon farmers’ market was one of the first in the state in 2009 to offer access

to low-income people seeking to buy fresh food with their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) dollars. (SNAP replaced food stamps.) This was not an easy feat, since the farmers' market had to find a way to provide Internet access for accepting the Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card. Most astonishing is that ten markets in the rural Southwest, with the assistance of Appalachian Sustainable Development and the Appalachian Farmers Market Association, now offer the same EBT access for low-income consumers.<sup>23</sup> Alongside Abingdon, advocates in other communities have nearly tripled the number of markets offering SNAP/EBT over the past five years to 36 with access in 2011. Some of this success is thanks to the Virginia Department of Social Services, which distributed 26 wireless terminals this past year through a pilot program.<sup>24</sup> Expanding access to other populations benefits the market itself, too, as markets that have accepted SNAP/EBT have reported sales increases of 10 percent to 20 percent.<sup>25</sup>

Other creative efforts to expand food justice bear mention. Gleaning, the recovery of perfectly good food from being landfilled or composted, whether gathered from farm fields, transport vehicles, farmers' markets, or restaurants, is becoming a significant avenue for food justice action in Virginia. In fact, Virginia can claim one of the nation's earliest and foremost leaders in gleaning, the Society of St. Andrew (SoSA), headquartered and directed by Stephen M. "Mike" Waldmann outside Lynchburg, in Big Island. Operating now in all contiguous states and the District of Columbia, SoSA has distributed since 1983 nearly 600 million pounds of gleaned produce to pantries and kitchens, with over 82 million pounds distributed to the hungry just within the commonwealth.<sup>26</sup> As gleaning gains recognition as a way to foster social justice, university students across the nation have begun forming chapters of Campus Kitchens, a project founded by the D.C. Central Kitchen, to glean unused campus foods to give to local food pantries. Three Virginia chapters are already in action at Washington & Lee, William & Mary and the University of Virginia.<sup>27</sup> In Southwest Virginia, another form of gleaning is occurring in the form of local monetary donations that enable market "leftovers" and farmer "seconds" to be purchased for donation to the local food pantries and kitchens, thereby benefitting both the farmers and the hungry. A variation on this theme is found in Charlottesville, where a gleaning program initiated by JABA

collects weekly market leftovers donated by the farmers. These products are then given to low-income meal programs in the area. Soon these donations will also be provided for nutritional cooking classes offered through the Boys and Girls Club and the Community Obesity Task Force.<sup>28</sup>

Local scrip is another avenue for increasing access to local food. In Nelson County "Nellybucks," scrip is distributed to county seniors for use at the farmers' market. In Charlottesville, a scrip initiated by JABA in partnership with other local organizations is now offered to low-income individuals and families to buy food at the farmers' market. An increasingly popular program sweeping across the country, which may have been first initiated by The Food Project in Boston, is to offer scrip that will double or even triple the value of SNAP dollars—often referred to as "double bucks" or "Double Up Food Bucks" if a part of the Fair Food Network program. These programs enable a SNAP recipient to purchase \$20 worth of local food for only 10 SNAP dollars, with the additional \$10 funded by grants, thereby creating a win-win for the farmer who achieves greater sales and for the SNAP client who obtains more fresh, healthy food. Given concerns that SNAP clients may not be comfortable patronizing markets that feel culturally unacceptable, JABA is planning a second phase in which Boys and Girls Club participants will use JABA's mobile EBT machine to take local food purchased from The Local Food Hub directly to low-income communities in the form of "mini-farmers markets."

Another major initiative to advance our food security is underway at Virginia Tech, led by Susan Clark, who is leading a team of Virginia Tech faculty and collaborators from West Virginia University, North Carolina State University, and a network of non-governmental organizations. Funded by the USDA, this five-year project will develop a "Foodshed Security" strategy for the South Atlantic Appalachian Region foodshed, giving special attention to improving affordable access to local food.<sup>29</sup>

These projects are mentioned, not as the definitive list but simply as examples of hundreds of community initiatives underway in Virginia. Unfortunately, there is not yet a comprehensive survey of these types of creative, innovative food projects in Virginia; an effort to document and study them would be a valuable contribution to advancing Virginia's food system, as it would enable communities to learn from and assist each other.

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## The Food Cubed Effect

Varying motivations of identity, new revenues, new jobs and businesses, health and justice, are spawning this multitude of initiatives that are advancing Virginia’s local food system. One way to understand the impact of the local food movement, and how it is about far more than food, is through a new term coined by E. Franklin Dukes, Director of the Institute for Environmental Negotiation. The “Food Cubed Effect” explains why so many people from so many different walks of life are finding a common cause in food—teachers, nutritionists, doctors, moms and dads, schools, hospitals, senior centers, youth groups like Boys and Girls Clubs, economic development commissions, tourism agencies, large and small farmers, butchers, markets, neighborhood grocery stores, and even home gardeners. Sustainability circles often speak of *oikos*—the Greek word for “house”—to convey the concept that the heart of a community’s “house” must include its social, economic and ecological fabric. It is easy to see how food, a basic human need, is an intrinsic component of community *oikos*. As communities plan for their future and become more aware, even passionate about, for example, establishing a sustainable water supply or sustainable housing and transportation, it is only natural that they will also begin to think about a more sustainable food system. In turn, as people seek to build a more sustainable food system, their efforts will find expression in social, economic and ecological pathways. The food cubed effect is an effective shorthand for describing these three main pathways in which the local food movement contributes to community sustainability, and it reminds us that while food may be an end, it also is a powerful means for achieving other important community goals.

## Broad Policy Implications

Access to adequate food is a basic human right recognized by the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>30</sup> Surprisingly, unlike other basic rights—such as those recognized by the U.S. Bill of Rights, including the freedom of religion, speech, a free press, free assembly, and free association, as well as the right to keep and bear arms—few nations either formally recognize or implement national policies that support the right to adequate food. Brazil is a leader in this regard, with its city of Belo Horizonte the first in the world to formally recognize this right in 1993 and, further, to adopt formal policies and food programs to ensure all of its citizens receive adequate food.<sup>31</sup> Other nations are beginning to follow suit: a recent April 2011 decision by the

Supreme Court of Nepal supported the right of everyone to adequate food and underlined the state’s role in ensuring that food is accessible and affordable for the people.<sup>32</sup>

In the U.S., however, the right to food is not yet considered an obligation of the state. Mark Winne argues in *Closing the Food Gap* that the rise of hunger-abating nonprofit organizations in the 1960s and 1970s, in response to the government’s failure to address a wave of rising hunger, led to the institutionalization of anti-hunger organizations and to the eventual conviction that it is their responsibility, not the state’s, to ensure that all have access to food.<sup>33</sup>

As we move farther into the 21st century, the local food movement is beginning to change our nation’s policy void on the right to food, though it is adding a distinctly American twist. Using the right to food as an underlying premise, some American towns and states appear more interested politically in protecting their “food sovereignty.” Food sovereignty might be considered a “sister policy” to the human right to food, as it focuses on the right of people to grow and exchange food. In Maine, the tiny town of Sedgwick became the first in the U.S. in March 2011 to adopt a Food Sovereignty Ordinance declaring the town’s right to produce and sell local foods of its own choosing, without the oversight of state or federal regulation.<sup>34</sup> At the state level, Vermont, Wyoming and Maine have been considering similar action. Maine once again led the pack when, in June 2011, its legislature unanimously passed a joint resolution declaring the state’s food sovereignty—stating that “food is human sustenance and is the fundamental prerequisite to life,” and that the “basis of human sustenance rests on the ability of all people to save seed, grow, process, consume, and exchange food, and farm products.”<sup>35</sup>

In Virginia, it is too early to say whether the local food movement will eventually lead to state action on either the basic human right to food or its sister right to food sovereignty. One early sign of this movement in Virginia might be the 2008 “home exemption law” in which the General Assembly exempted candies, jams, jellies and certain baked goods from inspection, if those items were sold at a farm or at a farmers’ market and labeled “Not For Resale-Processed and Prepared Without State Inspection.” The push for the 2011 “pickle bill” (SB920 Home Processing Bill), though unsuccessful, would have extended the inspection exemption to pickles made from the produce of one’s own garden with a pH value of 4.6 or lower, echoing the values of food sovereignty. A similar issue playing out at the state level concerns the introduction of a law to require

homestead raw goat milk cheese makers to build specialized pasteurization and milk handling facilities, which the Virginia State Dairy Goat Association argues will cause the state's growing number of homestead goat cheese operations to shut down.<sup>36</sup> Virginia law currently stipulates that it is illegal to sell unpasteurized milk except for farmers' market sales of raw goat milk and the cheese made from it. Though there is opposition to the homestead goat milk law, it is still unclear, however, whether the food sovereignty movement in Virginia will gain sufficient momentum to take hold as it has in other states.

At the local level, pressure by citizens is loosening and changing the very ordinances that, once signposts of advancing civilization and sanitation in the early 20th century, now seem relics of a bygone and misguided conception of community. When the Supreme Court decided in 1926 in the *Euclid*, Ohio landmark case that communities could adopt zoning ordinances to segregate (and keep distant from each other) industrial, agricultural, and residential functions, communities across the nation began using zoning to foster a cleaner, more modern way of living. Farms and factories were relegated to their own zones, away from residential-only zones, leading to the mid-twentieth-century phenomenon of suburbs, or urban sprawl. It wasn't until late 20th century that new urbanism took hold, rejecting the more rigid "Euclidian" separatist zoning, that communities seeking more livable and sustainable communities began to think about how to restore integrated, mixed business and residential uses to the urban and suburban landscapes.

In this context, the local food movement can be seen as a natural extension of the new urbanism movement, seeking to restore to the heart of our communities a broad range of activities that will reconnect us to food, our core sustenance. Communities are creating new food gardens in a host of spaces: at Virginia's K-12 schools where food gardens can be integrated into educational curricula for science, math, geography, nutrition and health; at Virginia's universities where students can learn to connect with their food in a new way, while often donating the product of their labors to the local hungry; in public parks and underutilized public spaces, enabling gardeners of all walks to rub elbows with each other while growing food, including recent immigrants and low-income families for whom the garden may keep their families from hunger. Food gardens are even cropping up on private property. An example is Richmond's Tricycle Gardens, which negotiated a \$5 per year lease from the developer of a one-half acre lot in the Manchester neighborhood.

To reduce unintended barriers to these community gardens and farms, localities may seek to change their zoning or other codes. Recently, the city of Richmond unanimously adopted an ordinance that will enable nonprofits to obtain permits to develop city property into community gardens.<sup>37</sup> A thorough survey of Virginia's city and county local ordinances is needed, as this would assist local food leaders and localities in understanding how their local laws sometimes create unintended obstacles and how they could be amended to support urban gardens, farms and markets.

Now, too, Virginia cities and counties may find themselves considering policies that would bring banished animals back into urban neighborhoods, such as ordinances to allow people to raise backyard chickens, goats, and bees. In September 2010 the Charlottesville City Council unanimously overturned on a 30-plus-year ban on urban goats when it adopted an ordinance to allow up to three miniature goats per household.<sup>38</sup> The Harrisonburg City Council adopted an ordinance in August 2009 to allow city residents on lots of two or more acres to keep up to four chickens.<sup>39</sup>

Though Virginia was ranked 39th among honey-producing states in 2004, interest in beekeeping is rapidly rising, so much that the Virginia Beekeepers Association is developing a Master Beekeeping Program.<sup>40</sup> Virginia's honeybees were estimated in 2006 at 38,000 managed hives producing over 1 million pounds of honey annually, with 12,000 to 15,000 colonies used to actively pollinate Virginia crops.<sup>41</sup> Still, some Virginia cities—like others across the nation—may outright ban backyard bees. The cities of Chesapeake, Suffolk and Hampton only allow backyard bees if the owner sells the honey. The cities of Norfolk and Fredericksburg and the town of Vienna are even stricter with an outright ban.<sup>42</sup> In response to pressure from the growing demands of bee enthusiasts, however, Norfolk City Council in April 2011 began considering the proposal to lift the ban on bees.<sup>43</sup> Yet another sign of Virginia's increasing interest in hobbyist beekeeping, the General Assembly, in its 2011 session, adopted legislation to exempt from inspection hobbyist beekeepers that sell less than 250 gallons of home-produced honey.<sup>44</sup>

As the local food movement gains momentum, a survey of local policies and city and county ordinances relating to community food production would be a helpful contribution, along with the development of model ordinances and, if needed, enabling legislation.

*“... the local food movement can be seen as a natural extension of the new urbanism movement, seeking to restore to the heart of our communities a broad range of activities that will reconnect us to food, our core sustenance.”*

## State Council Advances Virginia's Food Policy and Infrastructure

The beginning seeds for just such a systematic and broad-based approach to assessing Virginia's food policy were planted at the May 2007 summit, organized by the U.Va. Institute for Environmental Negotiation in partnership with Virginia Tech. The summit attracted 146 people representing a wide array of interests, including farming, economic development, public health, schools, social justice, community gardening, academia, and all levels of government. A written survey distributed to participants produced striking results, with over 90 percent agreeing or strongly agreeing that:

1. Food security is an important issue for Virginia.
2. Virginia's communities could benefit economically from cooperative efforts to improve access to and distribution of local food.
3. Children in Virginia's schools could benefit from connections to local farms in curricula and cafeterias.
4. Virginia's farmers could benefit from connections with local school curricula and cafeterias."<sup>45</sup>

In addition to this strong show of support for advancing Virginia's food system, the summit also produced several very specific mandates:

1. Create and fund a "Virginia Food Policy Council," in conjunction with stakeholder regional and local food policy councils.<sup>46</sup>
2. Create a stakeholder task force to develop a regulatory reform strategic planning initiative, aimed at assisting small farm operations in processing and distributing their products to local markets.
3. Assist and require localities to conduct food assessments and give high priority to protection of farmland specifically for food production.
4. Facilitate the rebuilding of infrastructure critical to processing and distribution of locally grown products, such as regional meat processing facilities for small producers.

Though the 2007 summit was designed to elicit participant recommendations through a combination of written surveys and small group discussions, the organizers had not anticipated such strong and specific outcomes. To follow through on this mandate, six months later the Institute for Environmental Negotiation and Virginia Tech convened an informal stakeholder

working group to discuss and act on the summit recommendations. Over the next 18 months, the working group agreed to establish a statewide council and discussed various options, including the possibility of establishment via an executive order. To this end, a delegation of the working group met three times with the Secretariat of Agriculture and Forestry in May, July and December 2008. Ultimately, the working group agreed, with the state's full support and commitment to participate, to establish the council as an independent nonprofit organization, ensuring the council's future political sustainability and independence.

On March 19, 2009, the Virginia Food System Council held its inaugural meeting and

### Virginia Food System Council Mission, Objectives, and Membership

Founded March 19, 2009

**Mission:** Working to advance a nutrient-rich and safe food system for Virginians at all income levels, with an emphasis on access to local food, successful linkages between food producers and consumers, and a healthy viable future for Virginia's farmers and farmland.

**Objectives:**

1. Educate and communicate to the public, food system stakeholders, and key decision makers, a sustainable food system's impact on health, community economic development, natural resources, and social well-being.
2. To examine how food is produced, distributed, and consumed throughout Virginia and to identify barriers and challenges that can be addressed through education, research, policy, or physical infrastructural improvements.
3. To make policy recommendations and implement strategies to improve the availability and accessibility of safe, nutrient-rich foods to Virginians in all areas.

**Membership designed to represent the broad cross-section of stakeholders involved in Virginia's food system.**

- a. 5 seats for Virginia government (VDACS, DCR, VDH, VT, Local Government);
- b. 4 seats for Virginia agriculture (VFBF, VABF, and 2 farmers);
- c. 2 seats for local food groups;
- d. 1 seat each for anti-hunger, consumer, conservation, institutional food acquisition, public health, rural development, senior/intergenerational services, schools, social justice, sustainability

*"The beginning seeds for just such a systematic and broad-based approach to assessing Virginia's food policy were planted at the May 2007 summit, organized by the U.Va. Institute for Environmental Negotiation in partnership with Virginia Tech."*

began the formative work of defining its mission and goals. For many in the state, the council is a landmark achievement for Virginia's food system, as it brings together interests that have not typically united for a common cause—public health and agriculture, schools and farmers, commercial distributors and farmers' markets.

An early policy success for the council was the unanimous passage by the Virginia General Assembly of HJ95 in 2010, with leadership from Delegate Ed Scott, which officially created a Virginia Farm to School Week during the second week of November. The Council's Vice-Chair, Christopher Carpenter, Special Projects Coordinator for Washington & Lee University, explained that the formal establishment of this week is "a beginning step in changing the quality of school nutrition while providing economic opportunities for our farming community and strengthening farm-to-table connections throughout the commonwealth of Virginia."<sup>47</sup> During Farm to School week, school cafeterias may serve locally produced food, classrooms may incorporate lessons about Virginia's food system, and students may visit farms and meet farmers. The goal, according to Matthew Lohr, Commissioner of Agriculture, is to create new connections between Virginia's farmers and youth that will "provide better economic opportunities for agriculture and healthier options for children."<sup>48</sup>



Farm to School Program. Photo Courtesy of the Virginia Dept. of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

Currently, a major policy push by the council is the ambitious development of a statewide Farm to Table Plan, which will be rolled out at the 2nd Virginia Food Security Summit, scheduled for December 5-6, 2011. The 2011 summit itself reflects Virginia's tremendous evolution in just four years, as the Virginia Food System Council, the University of Virginia Food Collaborative, Virginia Cooperative Extension, the Virginia Farm Bureau Federation, Virginia

State University, Washington & Lee University, and the Piedmont Environmental Council join the original sponsors (the Institute for Environmental Negotiation and Virginia Tech) in hosting the meeting. Drawing on information, ideas and suggestions from stakeholders who participated in listening sessions held in different regions of the state by Virginia Tech and the council in spring 2011, the plan will reflect needs and goals for Virginia's communities. This plan will be written by Virginia Tech, in partnership with the council, and will detail goals and strategies for advancing Virginia's overall food security, nutrition, health, local food production, processing and distribution infrastructure, markets, and affordable access to healthy food.

While it is too early to make predictions, the Virginia Farm to Table Plan's strategies will likely include numerous recommendations for policies, education and research. Using the 2011 summit as its launch for the plan, the council will seek to engage summit participants in identifying how to give the plan "legs." A successful state plan not only reflects the will of Virginia's communities, identified through the facilitated listening sessions, but it also will necessarily require work at the grassroots, regional and state levels. If successful, the 2011 summit will catalyze participants to support and help implement Virginia's first statewide food system plan.

### Growing the Ranks of Virginia's Farmers

One significant challenge for the local food movement is capturing the interest of young people in farming, as Virginia's farmers are getting ready to retire—with an average age of 58.2 and nearly 30 percent 65 years of age or older.<sup>49</sup> In response to this challenge, several groups in Virginia have initiated programs to entice, train and assist new farmers. The Local Food Project at Airlie and the Piedmont Environmental Council took the lead in 2008 when they launched the "Exploring the Small Farm Dream: Is Starting an

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*“Another interesting trend is the growing demand for sustainable and organic food, which is increasing farmer interest in transitioning to organic methods.”*

Agricultural Business Right for You?”—a four-day course developed by the New England Small Farm Institute to help people get down to business in making their dream of becoming a farmer come true. In this course, participants test their plans in a safe and supportive environment, evaluating their skills, plans, and identifying resources and risks. By the summer of 2010, more than 150 people had attended the course and demand was continuing strong.<sup>50</sup> This course provides practical direction, like how to overcome one of the biggest barriers to new farmers which is access to affordable land. Participants learn that leasing is a viable option and perhaps even more profitable than purchasing land. By talking with established farmers, they learn the importance of negotiating clear, specific terms for long-term leases.<sup>51</sup>

A nice complement to this course is the Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition Project, funded through the USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program and coordinated by Virginia Tech in partnership with the Virginia Association of Biological Farming and a number of other organizations. After people decide to pursue their dream to become a farmer, their need for assistance continues. The Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program hopes to fill this gap by developing a training and mentoring program for farmers who have operated a farm for ten or fewer years.<sup>52</sup> It envisions educational programs, services, and social networks as key tools for assisting beginning farmers and ranchers and has begun its work by conducting a survey of beginning farmer needs.

Another interesting trend is the growing demand for sustainable and organic food, which is increasing farmer interest in transitioning to organic methods. As noted above, more than 50 former tobacco farmers in Southwest Virginia, assisted by Appalachian Sustainable Development, have successfully transitioned to growing vegetables and become certified organic. In the Shenandoah Valley, six dairymen have transitioned to organic production, joining the national farmer-owned cooperative, Organic Valley Family of Farms, an important business to bring to Virginia. At the Harrisonburg Farmers' Market, Christine Burkholder reports that at least two farmer vendors have transitioned to organic methods of farming because “the customers have wanted it.”<sup>53</sup> The Virginia Association for Biological Farming provides ongoing support to Virginia farmers who desire to transition to and sustain biological and regenerative farms through regional workshops and field days and through its annual conference where farmers can find

inspiration and practical education about every aspect of stewarding healthy soils, animals and plants.

## **Advancing Virginia's Health Through Schools and Institutions**

While the demand for local food is clearly growing through markets and hubs, large institutional support for local food—such as by schools, universities, hospitals and nursing homes—is arguably the most important factor determining Virginia's long-term farm and food security. Effecting change at the institutional level is a slow process, as institutions, by their nature, change slowly. Bound by internal policies that take time to alter, they rely on large corporate food distributors whose policies and practices also take time to change, and, too, they require such mountainous quantities of food that many believe Virginia's small farmers will need years of adjustment to meet institutional demand in significant quantity. Despite these barriers, over the last five years Virginia's institutions are indeed beginning to turn their corporate ships toward local food.

In Virginia's 134 public school districts, participation in Farm to School week is quickly taking hold, with more than a doubling in just one year from 28 participating districts in its first year, in 2009, to 60 participating districts in 2010.<sup>54</sup> A major force propelling schools to increase their purchase of local foods is the national childhood obesity epidemic, leading communities to form obesity task forces, hire obesity prevention specialists, eliminate sodas and junk food from vending machines, and change school food menus.

Harrisonburg schools have been leading the way through the visionary leadership of Andrea Early, Harrisonburg's schools executive director of school nutrition. One of the state's leading proponents for farm to school, Early is demonstrating in her own school district what farm to school might achieve. By 2010, Early had increased school purchases of local produce, fruits, baked goods and meats to \$90,000, or 10 percent of its annual budget. She envisions a local flash freezing and cannery operation for preserving summer produce for winter consumption, and the creation of more local food distribution hubs serving schools throughout the state.<sup>55</sup>

Businesses are joining the effort to support healthier food in our schools. In partnership with the VFSC and Virginia Action for Healthy Kids, the Silver Diner restaurant chain in Virginia, Maryland and New Jersey, launched an “Eat Well, Do Well” rewards program in June 2010 that donates funds to local schools to improve nutrition and fitness programs.<sup>56</sup>

A survey of Virginia's schools participating in the 2010 Farm to School Week, conducted by the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, tells an interesting story of our remaining challenges for bringing fresh, local foods to our children in schools.<sup>57</sup> As expected, vegetables and fruits are easiest to source locally, while meats, eggs and dairy products present greater challenges. Although 28 percent of local foods were obtained from individual farmers and 6 percent from local food cooperatives, 59 percent were obtained through corporate distributors. The more all of these providers can offer local foods the easier it will be for our schools to serve fresh, local foods. Another interesting finding is that nearly 60 percent of the programs relied on volunteer assistance, meaning that it often takes the community working together to make these changes happen. The number of challenges facing schools is daunting; examples are locating farms, authenticating products, arranging delivery, and preparing the food once it arrives. To meet these challenges schools will require assistance and guidance for some years to come until locally sourced food becomes an integrated part of school cafeteria operations.

Institutions of higher learning are also making progress, often driven by a combined effort of students, faculty and local farmers. At Emory and Henry College, the Board of Trustees approved a local procurement policy in December 2010, requiring their food provider to source 10 percent of their college food from local farms beginning in the 2011-12 academic year and increasing to 25 percent by 2014-15. This commitment has led the college to buy both local produce and local, grass-finished ground beef.<sup>58</sup>

Equally important to institutional support is a commitment by the corporate food service itself. The Roanoke Division of U.S. Food Services (UFS), says Franklin M. Holland, business development manager and sustainability coordinator, is procuring and making available to its entire customer base throughout the region and state locally produced farm products, including the output of a local creamery.<sup>59</sup> While the baseline of local products is still small, Holland reports that sales of locally produced Virginia food grew in 2010 at a rate of 30 percent, and that he's working with Virginia's local food hubs to bring even more small farms into mainstream foodservice distribution. Their institutional customers can now buy Virginia-grown beef, pork, dairy, fruits, vegetables, breads and seafood, he says.

Going local actually makes economic sense, according to Holland. As sustainability coordinator, his goal is to reduce UFS's carbon and

environmental footprint through conservation, education, recycling and reducing food miles. As further evidence of this effort, UFS has set up a "backhaul" program to pick up products from producer's, thereby reducing farmers' costs and lowering overall food miles, and UFS is also working with a local nonprofit to explore the feasibility of a flash freezing facility to preserve local foods for use over winter months.<sup>60</sup>

Another corporate food service in Virginia named Sysco is committed to growing its supply of local food, says Chris Childers, produce manager. It's a good fit, he says, because it shortens their supply chain, decreases their carbon footprint, and also allows Sysco to invest in the local community. While locally produced items are just beginning to take hold, they are increasing at a fast pace, doubling from only six to eight fruits and vegetables in 2010 to sixteen by mid-2011, with plans to keep adding more. By working directly with Planet Earth Diversified and the Local Food Hub, Sysco is trying to add others such as Linda's Mercantile, a Winchester farm and grocery, to the Sysco family of vendors.

A third major player in Virginia's institutional food, Aramark, is also expanding its purchases of local food. At U.Va, the campus group Green Dining, which brings together students, faculty and staff, developed policies to help Aramark make sustainable food choices. Construed as a "bull's-eye," the policy places highest priority on purchasing food that is local (within 250 miles) and seasonal, which currently manifests itself in purchases of local hummus, salsas, tofu, eggs and produce. The second priority is to purchase organic, which now includes some salad bar items, tofu, as well as turkey and cheese sold at one campus café; the third priority is to purchase humanely raised foods, which now includes free range chicken and certified humane, cage-free eggs; and its fourth priority is to purchase fairly traded foods, which now includes coffee, vanilla ice cream, selected teas, chocolates and cocoa. To achieve its highest priority of buying local and seasonal, Aramark now partners with the Local Food Hub, which provides instant access to 45 local farmers. Another innovation by Aramark, says Kendall Singleton, U.Va. Aramark's sustainability coordinator, is the collaborative renovation of its Fine Arts Café by a professor, student and U.Va. Dining chef into its flagship role for local and sustainable dining. Singleton is also proud to point to the facility's certification by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality as a Virginia Exemplary Environmental Enterprise, meaning that it has fully met the requirements for an environmental management system pollution

*"The number of challenges facing schools [choosing to purchase local foods] is daunting; examples are locating farms, authenticating products, arranging delivery, and preparing the food once it arrives."*

*“It could be argued that Virginia’s food movement is growing in popularity because, regardless of education, economic or social status, there is something in it for everyone.”*

prevention program, and has demonstrated environmental performance.<sup>61</sup>

Another institution offering leadership in local food is Washington & Lee University, which is working with five other institutions—Virginia Tech and Ferrum, Lynchburg, Sweet Briar, and Roanoke Colleges—in a College Coalition for Local Purchasing—to enable joint purchase from the Homestead Creamery of milk and ice cream. Of these colleges, Washington & Lee leads the pack, says Christopher Carpenter, Special Projects Coordinator. At last count, the university had boosted its purchases of local foods to 19.4 percent of its total food budget. Carpenter explains that the school prioritizes its purchases of local foods, first seeking foods from local county farms, then from the larger Valley foodshed, and then from elsewhere in the state. He reports that W&L purchased \$140,000 from county farmers, \$230,000 from the Valley, including pork from Shenandoah County and chicken from Augusta County, and then bought peanuts from Southside to make fresh peanut butter and apples and peaches from Nelson County.<sup>62</sup>

While campuses have sprouted student-run gardens, Virginia Tech’s Dining Services has thrown its institutional support behind a campus garden at Kentland Farm, which has expanded to almost two acres and provides increasing quantities of student grown food for use in the dining halls.<sup>63</sup> Also, students provide the farm labor as part of their community service hours for the newly created Civic Agriculture and Food Systems academic minor.<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusion

It could be argued that Virginia’s food movement is growing in popularity because, regardless of education, economic or social status, there is something in it for everyone. There are multiple ways for people to be engaged and to engage others. And it is precisely because it is not an elitist movement—as it is sometimes wrongly characterized—that the community food movement is rapidly expanding.

At its core are the all-important issues of food security, health and nutrition, economic development, conservation of land and energy, sustainability and social justice that affect people in all walks of life. The staying power of the food movement may well depend on its ability to embrace all this and offer a clear benefit to all. In Virginia, joining helping hands for common cause continues to be a powerful force in the local food movement, as witnessed by the many ways people involved with local food are networking and going the extra mile to help each other. Doing things

the “Virginia way” means working together to advance our agriculture and local food system to ensure a more sustainable food future.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## Endnotes

Editor’s note: When available, web links for sources are shown. At the time of publication all of the links worked. However, some links may be unstable and may not work with certain browsers or they may have been modified or withdrawn. If you cannot open a link with your default browser, then try another. For example, if you cannot open the link with Microsoft Internet Explorer, try Firefox, Chrome, or Safari.

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